

A Comparative Study of China’s Railway Diplomacy under the Background of the “Belt and Road” Initiative: Taking the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the China-Thailand Railway as Examples

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Abstract

High-speed railway diplomacy is an integral component of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and a major subject in the study of China’s diplomacy. The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the China-Thailand Railway(which is also called the Sino Thai Railway) are important representatives of China’s railway diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Against the backdrop of the “Belt and Road” Initiative, this paper aims to explore the differences in the effectiveness of high-speed rail diplomacy between China and different countries as well as the underlying reasons by conducting an in-depth analysis of the cases of the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the China-Thailand Railway, employing qualitative and comparative analysis research methods. It also dissects the characteristics of China’s high-speed rail diplomacy model and strategies. This analysis demonstrates that China’s high-speed railway diplomacy is not a uniform strategy; instead, the approaches adopted are contingent on the host country’s specific conditions, including its state capacity, political regime and negotiation strategies. This study summarizes a current railway diplomacy model in China based on existing data, which includes “Technology Export, Standard Export, and Diplomatic Maintenance”. The proposed model not only contributes to the theoretical framework of China’s infrastructure diplomacy but also offers valuable insights for the future trajectory of its railway diplomacy.

Keywords

railway diplomacy, Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, Sino Thai Railway, the China-Thailand Railway

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative promoting infrastructure connectivity, the interconnection of infrastructure has become a crucial path for implementing the global governance concept of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits. In this context, the “going global” of China’s railways has emerged as a prominent practice that embodies both economic cooperation and diplomatic significance. Among them, the major railway projects represented by high-speed rail are not only an important manifestation of the “going out” of China’s advantageous production capacity and engineering technology

integration, but also an important manifestation of China's unique practice of "railway diplomacy". Existing research on railway diplomacy has yielded multi-faceted discussions. On the one hand, studies generally emphasize its geopolitical and economic integration functions, particularly focusing on large-scale infrastructure projects as important means of expanding regional influence. On the other hand, mainstream analyses often adopt a Chinese perspective, highlighting the logic of strategic planning and project advancement, while tending to view host countries as relatively passive recipients or arenas of competition. Consequently, insufficient attention has been paid to their internal political and social conditions, autonomous intentions, and their actual impact on project outcomes. Therefore, this paper attempts to move beyond narratives centered on a single actor. It selects two representative cases—the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway in Indonesia and the China-Thailand Railway—which exhibit marked contrasts in terms of implementation pace, cooperation models, and phased outcomes. By employing a methodology that combines qualitative analysis with comparative case study, this research conducts an in-depth examination of these two projects. This paper attempts to provide a more dynamic and balanced analytical framework for understanding the complex practices of China's infrastructure diplomacy by comparing the key interactive variables and conditional logics that influence the divergence of cooperative paths.

2. Literature Review

In October 2023, the white paper titled *Jointly Building the "Belt and Road": A Major Practice in Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind* [《共建"一带一路": 构建人类命运共同体的重大实践》], released by the State Council Information Office, explicitly stated that joint efforts in building the "Belt and Road" have promoted all-round and multi-field connectivity, and that infrastructure connectivity is a priority area in these joint fields. As a crucial component of infrastructure connectivity, railway construction holds significant importance in driving the economic and social development of countries along the "Belt and Road" routes, as well as in fostering economic and technological cooperation between China and these countries [1]. High-speed railway diplomacy is a key manifestation of China's major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. The proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative has catalyzed new opportunities for the "going global" of China's railway technology and high-speed rail industry [2]. Infrastructure connectivity has a significant impact on the diplomatic effectiveness of both countries.

With the development of the "the Belt and Road", the field of China's diplomatic research has expanded. Currently, "high-speed rail diplomacy" is a hot topic in the field of Chinese diplomacy research. Some Western scholars see China's high-speed rail diplomacy with bias. This comes from their traditional geopolitical thinking. But China's high-speed rail diplomacy is different. It is a key part of the Belt and Road Initiative. It is not limited by the old ideas. It follows the principle of "extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits." Its goal is to help build a global community with a shared future for mankind [3]. The research on "high-speed rail diplomacy" is mainly a display of China's achievements in reform and opening up [2].

A successful high-speed rail "going-global" project can yield abundant benefits across multiple domains such as politics and economy. It is conducive to shaping a positive international image, further demonstrating a country's own technological prowess, amplifying its development achievements, and conveying friendly signals. Additionally, it helps safeguard the livelihoods of relevant industrial chains, promote bilateral and multilateral economic and trade cooperation, and facilitate regional integration [4]. These railway projects operate through deep local procurement, technology transfer, and job creation etc. This close link between the exporter's strategy and the host's development needs ultimately promotes stronger diplomatic ties between the two countries.

Current research mainly focuses on three aspects: firstly, to focus on traditional fields such as maritime cooperation and trade investment, and analyze their geo-economic and strategic significance [5]; secondly, focusing on the model of China expanding its influence through large-scale infrastructure projects, which is the strategic logic of the so-called "infrastructure connectivity" [6]; thirdly, explanations based on a major-power-centric perspective are logically concise, but they pay little attention to the host country's intentions, actions, or internal conditions. It also treats the host nation merely as a space for major powers to carry out and compete in their infrastructure projects [7]. Especially amid the current trends of diversification in the world order and the rising prominence of the "Global South", based on previous studies, we find that existing research has overlooked comparative studies on iconic projects like high-speed railways. It lacks empirical analyses

that systematically compare similar infrastructure projects within the context of the “Belt and Road” Initiative and has not fully addressed the varying degrees of impact that the construction of the Jakarta - Bandung High - Speed Railway and the China - Thailand Railway have on their respective national diplomacies.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a research design that combines comparative case study method with qualitative research method. Selecting the Jakarta Bandung high-speed railway and the China Thailand railway as comparative cases, the construction characteristics of the two projects are taken as independent variables, and the railway diplomacy achievements between China, Indonesia, and Thailand are taken as dependent variables.

This research employs a comparative case study method. It does this by comparing the two cases in terms of their independent and dependent variables. By doing this, it aims to investigate how variations in national political and economic contexts influence cooperation models and diplomatic effectiveness. In addition, using content analysis to analyze government documents, cooperation agreements, authoritative reports, and relevant academic literature provides solid literature and data support for case comparison.

According to this research design, under the premise of controlling the common background of the “the Belt and Road” initiative, the article can focus on the key variable of the achievements of railway diplomacy, so as to deeply analyze the differences and reasons of the achievements of railway diplomacy between China and different countries, and analyze the mode and strategic characteristics of China’s high-speed railway diplomacy.

3.2 Research Procedure

The study initially selects the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the China-Thailand Railway as research objects based on the representativeness and comparability of the cases. Secondly, it collects relevant data from government documents, project agreements, authoritative media reports, and related academic literature of the two countries. On this basis, an analytical framework is constructed encompassing three dimensions: gauge standards, the degree of localization in the procurement and production of core components, and the allocation of operation and management rights. Subsequently, content analysis and qualitative research methods are employed to conduct in-depth analyses of each case, exploring the internal connections between independent and dependent variables. Finally, through cross-case comparison, the study systematically investigates the influence mechanism of host-country characteristics on cooperation models and diplomatic outcomes, thereby revealing the differentiated strategies of China’s high-speed rail diplomacy.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This study will provide a detailed analysis and comparison of two typical cases of China’s high-speed railway diplomacy and active technology transfer under the Belt and Road Initiative: the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the China-Thailand Railway.

The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway in Indonesia spans a total length of 142.3 km, with a maximum designed speed of 350 km/h. It stands as a landmark project for the high-quality implementation of the “Belt and Road” Initiative by China and Indonesia, and also marks the first instance where China’s high-speed rail has “gone global” with its entire system, all essential elements, and the whole industrial chain [8]. Based on the framework cooperation agreement between the Chinese and Indonesian governments and enterprises, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway project is being implemented using a complete set of Chinese standards [9]. The China-Thailand Railway is another representative project in China’s overseas infrastructure portfolio. Its Phase 1 connects Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, with Nakhon Ratchasima in the northeast (253 km). Phase 2 will extend from Nakhon Ratchasima to Nong Khai on the Thai-Lao border (356 km). Unlike the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, the construction of the China-Thailand Railway has been more complex and has faced delays due to various factors [10].

Through reading relevant literature, we found that there are three differences between the Yawan high-speed railway and the Zhongtai railway, which are the key factors for comparing the independent variables.

The analysis focuses on three aspects: the final railway gauge standard, the localization rate for procuring and producing core components, and the ownership of project operation and management rights.

The following table clearly shows us the different characteristics of the independent variables.

Table 1: Comparison of Independent Variables

Item	The final railway gauge standard	The localization rate for procuring and producing core components	The ownership of project operation and management rights
the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway	Employs China's self-developed CRTS III slab ballastless track system with proprietary intellectual property [11].	During its construction, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway project sourced a significant portion of raw materials and equipment locally, including steel, cement, and general machinery. This resulted in a local procurement rate of over 75% [12].	Since its official opening on October 17, 2023, China State Railway Group Co., Ltd., through its subsidiary China Railway International Co., Ltd., as the leading Chinese shareholder in PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia China (KCIC) - the entity responsible for constructing and operating the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway - has actively participated in KCIC's operations and management. Additionally, the China Railway Beijing Bureau Group Co., Ltd., under the national railway group, has partnered with Indonesia's railway company to form a Sino-Indonesian Operation and Maintenance Consortium (OMC). This consortium is entrusted by KCIC to handle train operations and equipment maintenance for the high-speed line [13].
the China-Thailand Railway	After prolonged negotiations, it was ultimately decided to adopt the Chinese standard gauge of 1,435 mm [14].	In contrast, the gauge selection for the China-Thailand Railway was a central point of contention. Despite Thailand's existing meter-gauge network, negotiations ultimately led to the adoption of the Chinese standard gauge in its first phase [9].	The infrastructure ownership and operational rights of the China-Thailand Railway will belong to the State Railway of Thailand. China's role in the project is that of constructor, technology supplier, and training provider [9].

The dependent variable in this study, namely "the outcomes of high-speed rail diplomacy," is primarily measured from the following two dimensions. First, the direct operational benefits and economic and social impacts of the projects. Taking the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway as an example, it has achieved significant results after its opening and operation. On October 17, 2023, the the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway was officially put into operation. As of December 31, 2024, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway has operated a total of 19426 high-speed trains, transported 7.19 million passengers, and safely operated over 3.11 million kilometers. After more than a year of operation, the Jakarta-Bandung High-speed railway has become a new landmark and popular check-in spot inIndonesia [15].As the "first overseas order" for China's high-speed rail and a flagship project under the China-Indonesia Belt and Road cooperation, the Jakarta-Bandug High-Speed Railway has cut travel time between Indonesia's largest city, Jakarta, and its third-largest city, Bandung, from over three hours to just 46 minutes. During its construction phase, the project also created approximately 39,000 local jobs, directly contributing to the improvement of people's livelihoods [9].Secondly, the enhancement of bilateral political and strategic relations. High-speed railway cooperation, as a flagship project, has significantly strengthened and elevated bilateral relations between China and host countries. This is evidenced by the increase in head-of-state diplomacy. With personal attention and support from Chinese leadership, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway officially commenced operations. Indonesian President Joko Widodo hailed the project as "a symbol of China-Indonesia friendship," stating at the inauguration ceremony that it "opens a new chapter in the strategic cooperation between the two countries." [16].This highest-level political endorsement represents one of the core achievements of high-speed rail diplomacy. In

contrast, although the China-Thailand Railway is still under construction, its collaborative progress itself has become a significant driving force in sustaining and advancing the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Thailand.

3.4 Theoretical Foundation

This study employs infrastructure diplomacy theory as its overarching macro-framework, integrating national capability theory with the logic of connectivity, to construct a comprehensive theoretical analysis system. The study employs a comparative case study approach combined with content analysis, unfolding through systematic research steps as follows. Firstly, based on the principles of case representativeness and comparability, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the China-Thailand Railway were selected as comparative cases. After determining the comparative objects, a database was established by collecting government documents, project agreements, authoritative reports, and academic literature from both countries. Based on this foundation, and drawing from state capacity theory, an analytical framework comprising three dimensions-technical standards, level of localization, and allocation of operational rights-is developed. Subsequently, content analysis is employed to conduct an in-depth examination of each case, analyzing the intrinsic relationship between project characteristics and diplomatic outcomes. Finally, through cross case comparison, from the theoretical perspective of interconnectivity logic, this study explores the differences in cooperation models under different national capacity backgrounds and their impact mechanisms on diplomatic effectiveness, in order to reveal the differentiated strategies and practical logic of China's high-speed rail diplomacy.

4. Results

By analyzing the independent and dependent variables, we can observe that notable differences exist in the cooperation models and diplomatic outcomes between the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the China-Thailand Railway, which profoundly reveals the variations in China's high-speed rail diplomacy across different countries.

4.1 Findings from the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway

The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway fully adopts Chinese standard gauge and the CRTS III track system, combined with a localization procurement rate exceeding 75% and an operation management model featuring deep Chinese involvement. This has formed a deeply integrated "Technology-Interest-Management" trinity model. Indonesia has accelerated its development through the construction of the railway, and China has achieved a dual output of technology and influence by collaborating with Indonesia on the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway. This represents a profound diplomatic engagement between Indonesia and China, serving as a typical case of friendly diplomacy under the framework of the "Belt and Road" Initiative.

4.2 Findings from the China-Thailand Railway

The cooperation model for the China-Thailand Railway is more characterized by strategic interaction and negotiation. Although a breakthrough was ultimately made in the gauge standard and Chinese standard rails were adopted, the operation rights were completely controlled by the Thai side. The construction of the China Thailand Railway was not a smooth sailing, but went through various adjustments. China's diplomatic achievements are more prominently reflected at the strategic level-laying a crucial fulcrum for the Pan-Asia Railway Network through breakthroughs in standards, and maintaining the stability of the China-Thailand strategic partnership through ongoing engineering cooperation.

4.3 Comparative Analysis and Conclusions

The comparison of two cases proves that China's high-speed rail diplomacy is not a single output model, but rather flexible and diverse. By adopting China's railway standards, procuring a substantial amount of local raw materials and equipment for the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, and granting operational rights to China, Indonesia has set a model benchmark for railway diplomacy. This has fostered economic and technological interactions between China and Indonesia, serving as a successful case of infrastructure diplomacy under the "Belt and Road" Initiative. Instead, in Thailand, standard breakthroughs and project

progress are achieved through strategic compromises. This spectrum of strategies, ranging from “comprehensive leadership” to “pivotal interventions,” while not representing the same depth of cooperation as seen in the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway case, nonetheless exemplifies the growing maturity of China’s infrastructure diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative.

5. Discussion

5.1 Differences in the Effectiveness of High-Speed Rail Diplomacy Among Different Countries and Their Reasons

The case analysis in this study reveals significant disparities in the effectiveness of China’s high-speed rail diplomacy in Indonesia and Thailand. These differences are manifested in varying degrees of cooperation depth, the pace at which outcomes materialize, and the extent of strategic influence.

China and Indonesia have achieved remarkable diplomatic outcomes through their cooperation. The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway stands as a quintessential success story of China-Indonesia collaboration under the Belt and Road Initiative. Its successful launch and efficient operation have not only delivered tangible benefits to the Indonesian public but also significantly enhanced China’s image in the country. This achievement in high-speed railway diplomacy serves as a powerful “living advertisement,” demonstrating to Southeast Asia and the world the capability and reliability of Chinese infrastructure.

In contrast to China’s relatively swift and impactful railway diplomacy with Indonesia, China’s railway diplomacy with Thailand has unfolded in a more gradual, strategic, and 博弈 (which can be translated as “strategically competitive” or “marked by negotiation and maneuvering”) manner. Although the China-Thailand Railway has not been fully completed, its major achievement lies in successfully integrating China’s standard-gauge railway into Thailand’s traditional meter-gauge system. Although this process was tortuous, it was effective in promoting strategic cooperation between China and Thailand, as well as facilitating the construction of the Pan Asian Railway and strengthening connections between countries.

5.2 The Model and Strategic Characteristics of China’s High Speed Rail Diplomacy

Based on the analysis above, we can summarize that China’s high-speed rail diplomacy model emphasizes strategic flexibility when exporting “Chinese standards”. In Indonesia, the Chinese railway model was almost entirely transferred and applied. In Thailand, however, a “strategic concession on operational rights” was made in exchange for a “breakthrough in technical standards,” demonstrating the patience and adaptability of China’s high-speed railway diplomacy. In the case of the China Thailand Railway, China ultimately accepted Thailand’s demand for operational rights. This demonstrates that when dealing with partners possessing stronger capabilities and heightened sovereignty awareness, China is willing to make tactical concessions to ensure the advancement of strategic projects, reflecting the strategic respect embedded in China’s high-speed rail diplomacy model for the host country’s sovereign concerns. From the perspective of completion and operational outcomes, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway may appear more successful. However, the assessment of railway diplomacy involves multiple dimensions. Viewed holistically, the China-Thailand Railway project itself represents a major achievement in infrastructure cooperation between the two countries within the diplomatic arena. Thailand’s adoption of Chinese railway standards alone marks a significant breakthrough in Sino-Thai diplomatic collaboration. In other words, whether it is the construction of the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway or the China-Thailand Railway, both serve as vivid examples of China’s proactive promotion of railway diplomacy under the “Belt and Road” Initiative, driving the evolution and advancement of railway diplomacy models.

Based on the above comparative analysis, this study summarizes the mode and strategic characteristics of China’s high-speed rail diplomacy: China’s high-speed railway diplomacy serves as a “national calling card.” By offering integrated solutions that encompass financing, construction, technology transfer, and operational maintenance, it not only helps host countries develop their infrastructure but also facilitates the export of Chinese technological standards, enhances China’s geo-economic and political influence, and advances the development goals of the Belt and Road Initiative.

China's high-speed rail diplomacy serves as a "national calling card," offering a comprehensive "package" solution that encompasses financing, construction, technology transfer, and operation & maintenance. While aiding partner countries in developing their infrastructure, it simultaneously achieves the objectives of exporting Chinese technical standards, enhancing geoeconomic and political influence, and advancing the goals of the "Belt and Road" Initiative. China's high-speed rail diplomatic model has flourished under the "the Belt and Road" initiative and exported in a peaceful way. Studying the models and strategic characteristics of China's high-speed rail diplomacy is beneficial for us to better comprehend and employ diplomatic approaches, thereby fostering regional prosperity and development.

6. Conclusion

This study delves into the practical models and varying outcomes of China's high-speed rail diplomacy under the "Belt and Road" Initiative by comparing two typical cases: the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the China-Thailand Railway. Research findings reveal a distinct differentiation in China's high-speed railway diplomacy: In Indonesia, it achieved deep integration of technical standards, industrial chains, and operational management. In Thailand, it formed a "strategic embedding" model centered on standard breakthroughs while respecting the host country's operational sovereignty. These differences primarily stem from variations in the host countries' national capabilities, political systems, and negotiation strategies. Indonesia's relatively stable domestic political environment and urgent self-development needs have created conditions for in-depth cooperation, whereas Thailand's complex internal political landscape and strong sense of sovereignty have prompted China to adopt a more flexible cooperative strategy.

Through this study, we can discover a comprehensive strategy for China's railway diplomacy. This strategy is not a single model and can flexibly adapt to different national conditions. Its essence is a form of "context-adaptive" diplomacy. This diplomatic strategy is characterized by the following features: it maintains a firm commitment to exporting technological standards, flexibly adapts the degree of localization and operational rights based on the host country's specific conditions and needs, and strategically balances immediate project implementation with the long-term cultivation of bilateral relations. Based on these characteristics, we can summarize the model of China's railway diplomacy as "Technology Export, Standard Export, and Diplomatic Engagement." This diplomatic model, which is both clear in core principles and flexible, provides a new research perspective for understanding the reasons for the differences in cooperation between China and different countries under the Belt and Road Initiative.

This study has important implications for promoting China's high-speed rail diplomacy. In the future, the following strategies can be adopted for infrastructure construction under the "Belt and Road" Initiative: First, implement a differentiated cooperation strategy by tailoring approaches to each country's political system and development stage, adjusting the depth of engagement accordingly. Secondly, innovate a "construction-operation" separation cooperation model. While adhering to technical standards, demonstrate greater flexibility on sensitive issues such as operational rights, thereby striking a balance between sovereignty aspirations and the export of standards. Thirdly, focus on the sustainable development of diplomatic projects, emphasizing long-term operation and talent cultivation. Projects should establish a full lifecycle benefit assessment mechanism, integrating construction with long-term operation, talent development, and industrial collaboration to achieve sustainable cooperative benefits. A limitation of this study is its focused examination of only two representative cases: The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the China-Thailand Railway. Future research could be expanded in the following directions. Firstly, continue in-depth research by incorporating quantitative studies on top of the current research, such as continuously tracking the radiating and driving effects of railways on host countries after their construction. Secondly is to expand the sample size, analyze the railway cooperation between China and countries such as Malaysia and Vietnam, and explore the characteristics and differences of China's high-speed rail diplomacy in different regions such as Asia, Africa, and Europe; Thirdly, conduct comparative studies that contrast China's cooperation models in third-country markets with those of other leading high-speed rail nations like Japan and Germany, thereby enriching the theoretical framework of China's infrastructure diplomacy.

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